



PARKS AND RECREATION MASTER PLAN
CITY OF HOUSTON
Final Draft – September 2001

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PURPOSE OF A MASTER PLAN

The City of Houston is preparing this master plan to guide the future growth, development, and redevelopment of the City's parks and recreation system. This effort has been initiated in accordance with the recommendations of the City of Houston Transition Team Study – Neighborhood Oriented Government Steering Committee, appointed by Mayor Lee Brown. The Committee's report specifically recommended the development of a master plan that "...identifies multi-year priorities for park acquisition, maintenance, program administration and management of other services". A key element of the Plan is to identify, assess, and prioritize park and recreational facility needs. The completed Plan, upon adoption by the City Council, will meet the requirements of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission for Houston to be considered for matching state funds for park acquisition and improvements. The Plan covers the entirety of Houston's existing corporate limit and addresses a minimum planning period of ten years.

PREVIOUS PLANS

Park system master planning is not a new endeavor to Houston although it has been 18 years since the last major planning effort was completed. The earliest park system master plan was completed in 1912 by consultant Arthur Comey. Houston's population at the time was about 90,000. Subsequent plans were prepared in 1929, 1942, 1952, 1961 and 1977. For many years, the Houston City Planning Commission actively participated in park system planning and park site acquisitions. In fact, the 1940 City ordinance establishing the Commission authorized its members to prepare and recommend to City Council general plans for Houston's physical development including major thoroughfares, parks, transportation facilities, and public buildings.

The most recent comprehensive park system planning effort was initiated in 1979 by local, state and federal authorities in response to a 1977 National Urban Recreation Study, which indicated Houston, was greatly deficient in parkland. A Green Ribbon Committee of more than 60 citizens was appointed to develop a strategic plan for Houston and Harris County. The Green Ribbon Report, completed in January, 1983, called for a seven year program of land acquisition and facilities improvements estimated at \$1 billion dollars. The following year, Houston voters approved a \$67.6 million parks and recreation bond program. Since 1983, nearly 13,000 acres have been acquired or leased as parkland, including the 10,000+ acre Cullen Park within the Addicks Reservoir owned by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

POPULATION

Preface

Concurrent with preparing this park master plan, a similar citywide planning effort was initiated by the City of Houston Library Department to develop a library master plan. As part of that effort, an excellent report was prepared examining the demographic changes occurring in the Houston area and what can be expected in the next 10-12 years. This report, entitled *Houston and Its People: Growth and Change in the Metropolitan Area*, was written by Richard Murray, Director, and Mark Hinnawi, Senior Research Associate, of the University of Houston Center for Public Policy. The report, highlighted below, provides a wealth of information equally applicable to parks and recreation planning. *(Please note that Census 2000 data was not available at the time this report was prepared and when this Master Plan was printed.)*

Summary

Houston's parks and recreation system must address a dynamic user population that changes year-by-year, moves frequently, and has varying recreational and leisure interests.

Houston's expanding economy always depended on importing workers. For most of the 20th century, they usually came from small towns in the South, and then later from around the country as more highly trained employees were needed. More recently, new workers in Houston have increasingly been born outside the U.S. Since 1960, Houston has changed from a very traditional southern city to a gateway metropolis with a diverse population. Thus, the park system will increasingly serve a population with different recreational interests than in the past when the local user base was largely native-born white and black Americans.

Once people came to Houston, they continued to move around within the region. A younger, often upwardly mobile population contributed to changing neighborhoods. Massive out-migration of middle and working class whites from the City in the 1960's and 1970's has been followed by "black flight" from many inner city neighborhoods since the mid-1980's. Lately, Houston has seen a return of Anglos to older parts of the City. This means that the populations around park and recreation facilities can change greatly in a relatively short period of time.

Because of its relatively young age profile, Houston has more children in public schools, relative to population size, than other metropolitan areas. This suggests that parks and recreational facilities have to be especially focused on serving persons under 18. With the largest source of growth being younger Hispanics, the park system must accommodate this reality as well.

Population Growth

As shown in Figure 1.1, the region's population has doubled every 20 years from 1900 to 1980. Regional growth has slowed since 1980 but remains well above the national average. Population growth within the City matched the regional pace until the 1970's but has lagged behind in recent years. The City's population as a percentage of the region has been as high as 81% in 1930 but was only 44% in 1990.

Figure 1.1: Past Population Growth

YEAR	POPULATION OF METROPOLITAN AREA	POPULATION OF CITY	CITY'S POP. AS % OF REGION
1900	63,786	44,633	70
1910	115,693	78,000	68
1920	186,667	138,276	74
1930	359,328	292,352	81
1940	528,961	384,514	73
1950	806,701	596,163	74
1960	1,418,323	938,219	66
1970	1,985,031	1,232,802	62
1980	3,099,942	1,595,138	51
1990	3,731,131	1,631,766	44

Source: U.S. Census Bureau (Through 1960, the Metro area was defined as Harris County. By 1990, it included seven additional counties.)

Population growth will continue into the 21st Century for several reasons:

1. Many major energy companies are consolidating their operations in Houston
2. International trade through the Port of Houston continues to grow, especially with Latin America. Houston is already the nation's second largest seaport.
3. The health care field continues to expand, in a city with one of the world's largest medical centers.
4. The regional economy continues to diversify. During the 1990's Houston has lead the nation in the formation of new small businesses.

Population forecasts prepared by the University of Houston Center for Public Policy are presented in Figure 1.2. Projections are given for both the City and metropolitan area. Historically, most of Houston's growth has come from annexations; however, future major annexations are less likely because of changes in state law. Houston has begun to see significant redevelopment in many older neighborhoods, including largely depopulated areas near downtown such as Midtown. If these trends continue, densities will increase within the city limit, and population growth will occur even if little new annexation happens. At least two-thirds of the overall projected regional growth will occur outside the City limit. Urban redevelopment may yield a net gain of 200,000 by the year 2010, an estimate considered overly optimistic by many.

Figure 1.2: Projected Population Growth

YEAR	CITY	% CHANGE	METRO AREA	% CHANGE
1990	1,631,766	-	3,731,131	-
2000	1,835,000	+12	4,520,000	+21
2005	1,915,000	+4	4,820,000	+7
2010	1,995,000	+4	5,180,000	+7

Source: UH Center for Public Policy

Transformation of Houston

For most of its 160 year history, Houston's population was composed of a southern white majority and a significant black minority. The area's biracial, segregated makeup lasted through the 1950's. After 1960, Houston's population began to change due to: 1) a growing influx of whites from outside the South, and 2) the explosive growth of the Hispanic population. These changes are reflected in Figure 1.3 below. Today, the Houston area has a greater degree of racial/ethnic diversity than any of the 10 largest metropolitan areas in the United States except for Los Angeles.

Figure 1.3: Racial and Ethnic Makeup

YEAR	CITY OF HOUSTON POPULATION %				METRO POPULATION %			
	ANGLO	BLACK	HISPANIC	ASIAN	ANGLO	BLACK	HISPANIC	ASIAN
1950	73	21	5	1	76	19	5	0
1960	69	23	7	1	74	19	6	0
1970	61	26	12	1	71	18	10	1
1980	53	27	18	2	66	18	14	2
1990	41	28	27	4	58	17	22	3
1998 est.	40	26	29	5	53	17	26	4

Source: U.S. Census, 1950-1990

UH Center for Public Policy, 1998 estimate

Rapid Hispanic growth in the region has been driven by a considerably higher birth rate coupled with a population that is younger than the Anglo and black populations. This natural increase has been augmented by sizable immigration. A second major stream of immigration has come from eastern and southeastern Asians. In 1970, just 1% of the region's population were of Asian or Pacific ancestry, but by 1998, that had increased to 4%. Hispanic and Asian growth combined has resulted in a steep drop in the percentage of the region's population that is Anglo as well as a slight decline in the African American share. However, the percentage drop of whites in the City slowed in the 1990's, partly due to the annexation of mostly Anglo Kingwood, the out-migration of inner city minorities to the suburbs, and the gentrification of older neighborhoods like Montrose and the Heights.

Rapid Hispanic growth is likely to continue, followed by population gains among Asians, with Anglos and blacks continuing to increase in the area but at slower rates than the other groups. Also expected is more minority growth shifting to the suburbs, and the Anglo share within the city stabilizing.

Racial and Ethnic Housing Patterns

African American

Historically, Houston's black population was concentrated in five major, well-defined communities, and in about 20 smaller neighborhoods scattered across the City and Harris County. This pattern of racial housing segregation began to change in the 1970's but accelerated dramatically in the 1980's as part of the oil and real estate bust that hit the region. The combination of a sharp contraction in the local work force and an overbuilt housing market opened up a sizable stock of mostly suburban housing to minority and lower income residents of the region. The magnitude of the out-migration of Houston's inner city black population is evident in the following statistics that focus on 15 heavily African American census tracts inside the Loop 610. In 1970, the inner loop tracts had 119,518 black residents; in 1990 they had just 46,319, a 61.2% decrease. For the same tracts, blacks were 86.3% of the population in 1970, but just 55.8% in 1990.

Hispanic

After World War II, areas like Denver Harbor, Canal-Navigation, and the near north side gradually became more Hispanic, but most settled in predominantly Anglo neighborhoods across the region. In the 1960's and 1970's, Hispanics tended to replace older Anglos in blue-collar areas within the City. Like blacks, they have generally benefited from the affordability of newer suburban housing after the oil and real estate downturns.

The dispersion of minority populations since the mid-1980's has resulted in a number of substantially mixed neighborhoods inside and outside the City. The largest number of Hispanics in Harris County (28.2%) live in census tracts where they are less than 20% of the population.

Asian American

Another factor contributing to the increasing integrated residential patterns is the wide dispersion of the growing Asian populations. In 1990, the single most heavily Asian origin census tract in Harris County was just 28.3%, and only five tracts were greater than 20%. While the region's Asian residents have tended to settle in southwest Harris County and eastern Fort Bend County, most reside in overwhelmingly non-Asian neighborhoods.

Anglo

As noted earlier, there was a general pattern of outmigration of Anglos from the region following the 1980's oil bust. Many of those who stayed in the region moved to planned upscale communities in the suburbs as the City lost a net of about 180,000 Anglo residents between 1980 and 1990. Today, there is still a strong regional movement of

Anglos, and some minorities, into exurban communities far from the inner city, but a countertrend has emerged. There is now a large area within the City where significant new housing is being constructed and largely occupied by Anglo residents. Much of the inner city, especially on the near west side is getting whiter and more affluent with more households but less persons per household.

Population Density

The Houston area has the lowest population density of any large metropolitan area in the United States, and the City of Houston is one of the least dense municipalities. With a current population of about four million spread over 2,500 square miles in Harris County and urbanized portions of adjacent counties, the average density is just 1,600 persons per square mile. The average population density within the Houston city limit is just under 4,000 persons per square mile. The highest density is in the Gulfton area with over 13,000 residents per square mile, followed by Pecan Park with more than 12,000, and Montrose at just over 8,000. Appendix A provides 1997 population estimates for each of the City's 88 super neighborhoods, their area in square miles, and resulting population count per square mile.

The very low densities in the Houston metropolitan area reflect several factors:

1. Widespread availability of developable land
2. Majority of regional growth in the automobile age
3. Major highway and freeway improvements and new home mortgage deductions that have promoted suburban development since World War II
4. Minimal local controls on land use (i.e., the absence of zoning)

Age Distribution

Another distinctive aspect of the local population is its relatively young age. This area has only about one-half of the senior population as compared to the nation as a whole. Because of Houston's strong labor market, the population bulges in the productive, working years of adults. Many are aged 25 to 39, when they typically marry and begin families, which partly explains the relatively large number of children in the Houston region. Houston exceeds national averages by about 20% for ages under 15.